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Pieces of Paper

BRINGING under control the great tidal wave of pieces of paper is a challenge to management in all businesses, big or small.

Not many years ago the office handling of paperwork was looked upon as merely a necessary evil. While money was spent liberally on machines for the factory, advertisements to expand distribution, and trucks to carry the goods, the office remained neglected. Yet here is the hub from which all the production and distribution spokes radiate.

Clerks are not at their desks to register, enter, check, tick off and rubber stamp. They are there to provide the shortest and simplest path between the source data and the required end.

In an unexpectedly human simile The Royal Commission on Government Organization said in its report in 1962: "Good management, like good coffee, depends on the quality of the raw material and the care devoted to its preparation."

Good management is what paperwork needs, and there is no time to be lost in putting it into effect. The manager needs a pad of red labels like those used during the war by Mr. Churchill. They said: "Action this day."

It used to be the universal answer to a paperwork problem to hire more help. This has been outmoded by the high cost of office space, the difficulty of getting workers, and the high salaries needed to keep staff. The solution lies in improvement of procedures, updating of equipment, discrimination as to what is done, and checking of the output.

Asking questions about established procedures is the first thing for the office manager to do. He will find it difficult to measure clerical work, but it must be done if office work is to be made realistic. He is throwing away any hope of improvement if he accepts the statement about any operation: "This is the way it has always been done."

Efficiency demands that the office manager be able to account for the time of secretaries, typists, filing clerks and all other office workers who handle paper. What is being done by whom? Is it necessary? Is it being done efficiently?

It is easy to think of paper as being cheap, but paper processed by many hands is very expensive.

Some companies have found that intelligent application of work standards has reduced the number of operations and the time involved by sixty per cent. One organization, reports C. Northcote Parkinson in *In-Laws and Outlaws*, got rid of 22 million pieces of paper per year by eliminating statistical information of which no use was ever made.

What has happened

The paperwork flood has been raised by the surge in our economy, the demands of governments for increasingly numerous returns, the expansion of universal education which not only makes people capable of writing but gives them the desire to write, and the inclusion of paper output as a status symbol. A handful of paper is, in many office corridors, a sort of badge, on a level with the black rod carried by the Gentleman Usher when he progresses through the galleries of Parliament to summon the Commons to the Red Chamber.

On the business executive level, the flow of paper has gone beyond being a nuisance and seems now to be a purgatory in which the executive is condemned to pass all his days. Ordinarily waist-deep in pieces of paper, he worries that a week's absence will bring the high-water mark up to his neck.

An estimate published in the Hoover Commission Report said that businesses in the United States store and file more than a million million pieces of paper, and add 175,000 million pieces a year. A Soviet economist warned in January that by 1980 Russia's economic-planning apparatus will require more than a hundred million people to do its paperwork unless it is revamped.

Here in Canada, the Census of 1961 showed that thirteen per cent of all the labour force is engaged in clerical occupations. The Civil Service Commission reported in *Manual of Forms Design and Control* in 1955: "In industry the ratio of office employees to

factory and shop workers was 1 to 30 in 1900, 1 to 10 in 1935, and 1 to 2½ in 1950." The Royal Commission reported: "Adding the cost of supervision and fringe benefits, the clerical labour cost of the Government of Canada exceeds \$400 million a year."

We cannot get along without paperwork. The purpose of marks on paper is to contribute to the successful operations of business. If the pieces of paper have the right marks on them they guide management. What we can do is see to it that the information is necessary, that it is correct, and that it is concise.

How to cope

In a real sense, forms, records and paperwork are the sole office product. They become troublesome when office workers leap to the conclusion that increased output of papers is an indication of efficiency. It must not be thought that the bureaucrat exists only in government offices, with his ambition to make two pieces of paper sprout where only one grew before.

There is a growing and justifiable impatience of multiplying the filling in of forms. One survey showed that about one-third of the records kept by the average business could be thrown out without impairing operations in the slightest degree. These useless records cost money, measured in terms of paper, filing space, equipment, and clerical servicing.

When tidying up the accumulation, and when starting a new form, ask: "Can this be eliminated? Can it be combined? Can it be simplified?"

After tidying up, take a look at the system used in purchasing and distributing forms. Unless watched very closely, office personnel are inclined to requisition new forms where existing forms would be just as effective. Don't reprint a form without inquiring whether its use has lapsed or changed. Should the design be improved to facilitate handling? Perhaps a different reproductive method would help both in handling and in reducing costs.

Forms control requires centralization. Someone with a sense of responsibility and the necessary authority should have it as a definite duty to see that forms are brought to birth and that they are used and disposed of so as to get maximum value from the clerical dollar. This requires elimination, simplification and consolidation. It means consideration of the procedures and work methods so as to ensure smooth flow.

A forms-control programme may save its year's cost in a few months. One company found that fifteen per cent of its forms could be eliminated, representing a pure profit through saving the original cost of paper and printing and reducing staff handling.

As a minimum, delivery of forms should be recorded in a stationery stock inventory book. The date, title, number and quantity is noted. The output is recorded as forms are put into circulation. A "deadline" quantity is set, and when that is reached the stock-keeper brings up the question of reordering.

Designing forms

No inexperienced clerk is capable of designing business forms so as to take advantage of modern equipment and office systems. Inadequate home-made forms are taking their toll every day through waste of working time. Faulty design and poor layout will result in extra work at every step in the form's use. Well thought out and efficiently executed designs may reduce the operating costs of an office by ten or fifteen per cent.

What to put on your form is something peculiar to your business, not governed by a rule book, but there are some basic features in forms design that will save money. A form should call for a specific kind of information, no more and no less than required. It should make the information easy to enter and easy to use. It should be produced as cheaply as possible having regard to the use for which it is intended. It should be simple, so as to reduce errors.

The form should be as nearly self-explanatory as possible. Separate instructions are likely to be lost. Captions and item headings, in familiar words, guide every user. The type should be legible. Eccentric spacing and hard-to-read type act as brakes on working momentum.

A well designed form has functional beauty. When it has a pleasing balance in its pattern elements, legible type, and a good allowance of white space, the eye is guided rather than irritated.

The production of forms is a highly specialized branch of the printing industry. It is geared to turning out forms all the way from the common telephone message memo to forms designed for business machines requiring hair-line registration and automatic feeding.

It must not be lost sight of that the cost of the proper paper and good printing represents only a small part of the total cost—the hours spent in making out the forms, transferring the information to books or other forms, and filing. It has been estimated that for every dollar spent on forms, from ten to twenty dollars are spent on clerical work. The Royal Commission emphasized this by quoting an estimate that the cost of processing forms is as much as ten to fifty times greater than the cost of printing them.

Memoranda

The written memorandum is a great time-saver. The writer can marshal his thoughts so as to put what he wants to say into the most concise form, and the reader can give attention to the memo at a time when he is free from distractions.

But memoranda are agents of activity. Copies "For your information", sometimes abbreviated to "FYI", should be vetted. Don't send out copies except to the people who are or should be directly concerned with the subject-matter.

The urge to circulate is prevalent in business. Effort is made to keep everybody in touch with one's work and progress. With modern duplicating methods it is as easy to make fifty copies as ten. The result is that pieces of paper demanding initials are piled high in the "IN" tray every morning. If everyone read everything that he received, he would do no work.

There would be time- and dollar-saving eliminations if everyone asked everyone else just what he wished to see, and if those who received unwanted copies returned them with a note asking for removal from the circulation list.

As to the writing of memos, here is a small formula to make them dynamic, effective and brief: keep every point in your statement logical; cover the facts and points required, but no more. Write clearly.

The mail

The mail started about 3800 B.C. when Sargon, King of Babylonia, handed messages to a newly-organized band of runners. They departed to all parts of his empire to the sound of golden trumpets.

Today's mail is more likely to inspire groans than trumpets. Writers of letters seem to have carried over into their work the ideal of letter-carriers expressed by Herodotus, the Greek historian, about 440 B.C.: "Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor night, prevents them from performing their appointed stage."

It is estimated that more than 100 million pieces of incoming mail are processed annually by departments of the Federal Government, and 200 million pieces are sent out. Transportation and handling of all these pieces of paper, and the untold millions exchanged by business firms, is a mammoth undertaking. The first postage stamp of the provinces of Canada was issued in 1851, and today, 114 years later, *The Canada Official Postal Guide* has 466 pages of directions, rates and suggestions governing mail. The index alone has 22 pages covering everything from "Absence of postmasters" to "Zones."

What can be done about all these pieces of paper? The time has come to do some pruning. The estimated cost per letter, for secretarial work, indirect labour, materials and postage, ranges from \$2.97 in top management to \$1.43 when the letter is dictated to a machine and transcribed by a pool typist.

If you don't wish to write fewer and shorter letters, you may be tempted to use form letters requiring only fill-in of the address to. These could be used only for routine communications, and forms would likely do as well.

Office practice

All office work is done in sequence, and for this reason desks should be so placed as to facilitate the flow of work so that papers move as nearly as possible in a straight line.

Precision of thought and action should guide the

treatment of every sheet of paper at every desk. An incompetent employee may be seen rearranging things with inattention and indecision, so that at the end of half an hour she has moved nothing ahead. A skilled employee tries not to handle pieces of paper twice when once will do. Whatever she picks up prompts the instinctive question: "Now that I have touched this, where shall I put it so that the next step will be taken by the right person without unnecessary handling?" She will not fold anything, but will keep it flat until it has been attended to.

Office workers are, like everyone else, fond of their working habits, and any deviation tends to meet with automatic resistance. The best procedure, when introducing new methods of handling paperwork, is to explain them fully and tell the reason for the change. A work distribution chart, listing the major kinds of work done in your office and showing how much contribution each employee makes to it, is useful.

Small offices are likely to suffer waste of time by overdoing the switching of staff from job to job. Valuable working time is lost, because papers, records, books and equipment must be put away and materials for the next job brought out. It is versatility rather than specialized skill that commands a premium in the small office, but the manager can plan the jobs to be done so that change-over time is kept to a minimum.

Paper-handling machines

Manufacturers of office equipment and supplies have made truly significant advances in providing machines designed to handle the paper explosion. The plain truth is that office work has reached such a peak as to demand machine help if it is not to stifle.

A century ago practically all information was entered by clerks with only the most rudimentary equipment. The result was that management had to be content with much less information, an amount quite unequal to coping with today's increased manufacturing and trade. Outmoded equipment costs more per year in wasted time and energy and incomplete information than it would cost to equip the office with modern facilities.

Office management's great sin is indiscrimination in buying. Machines should be selected prudently with the particular needs of the office and its work well understood. When purchased with care, machines will reduce costs, eliminate monotonous jobs, enhance the appearance of the output, improve quality and accuracy, and relieve peaks and bottlenecks.

It is estimated that it costs about fifty cents for a typist to re-type a page of ordinary copy; a copying machine can do it for ten cents or less, perfectly, with no time lost in checking.

Paper and the banks

It is because the banks make commerce so easy by encouraging the cheque system of exchange that they

find themselves under the necessity to fight their way out of a blizzard of cheques by the aid of electronic and other equipment.

The Federal Reserve Bank in the United States estimates that \$9 out of every \$10 owing by Americans is paid by cheque. There are about sixty million chequing accounts there, against which an estimated fifty to sixty million cheques are issued every business day. By 1970 the Federal Reserve will be handling nearly twenty thousand million cheques annually. And every cheque passes through fourteen pairs of hands. The situation is proportionately the same in Canada.

All this could not be done under a hand-operated system. Consequently, the banks are changing to electronic data processing, by which 10,000 characters of information can be recorded magnetically on a square inch of tape in digital form and processed at more than 100,000 characters per second.

Look the situation over

Many books have been filled with suggestions for the office manager who is trying to bring the paper flood under control, but they all start with this advice: "Scrutinize your office."

Output from an office is represented superficially by pieces of paper and not something big, heavy and expensive like steel beams. You don't easily trip over the paper, and are likely to become so habituated to it that you don't notice it.

Look at the papers being shuffled from desk to desk. Are they all necessary? It is so easy to ask for a new statistic, to institute a new form, to make extra copies "just in case". There is an apparently inexhaustible demand for data: make sure that it is needed data, and not just an array of figures that will remain unread except by the girls who type it.

Having analyzed the work of your office, read the definition of paperwork management given in the Royal Commission Report: forms must be controlled to keep their number within bounds; reports must be kept under continuous scrutiny to weed out those no longer required; drafting, dictating, typing and mailing of correspondence require the development of standards and the application of procedures and equipment designed for efficient production; records must be filed in cabinets or recorded on film, with a minimum of duplication, and so stored that they can be quickly turned up for reference; orderly procedures are required to ensure timely transfer from high-cost office space to low-cost records centres, and eventual removal to the archives or to the machine which turns the paper back into pulp.

Many executives are stubborn in refusing to get rid of unnecessary documents. The practice of getting and hoarding information is more common than office managers recognize. Millions of pieces of paper that are of no possible use are moved from files to cartons and boxes and piled in otherwise usable or rentable

space. One investigator found that a firm with 250 employees had 561,000 obsolete pieces of paper cluttering up its files.

"Discrimination" is a good word. It may be better to be annoyed two or three times a year by not finding something you wish to refer to than to be annoyed all year long by space-filling files that require a professor of library science to keep in order and a sleuth to find anything in them.

It is no longer possible to get rid of obsolete paper by tearing it up and showering it on parading heroes. Today's offices have windows that do not open.

But if you can't break the habit of filing everything, the technology of microfilm for mass storage and retrieval may be your salvation.

Thin out the flood

The highest executive in the land is just as powerless in saying "stop the flood" as was King Canute when he tried to bring to a standstill the rising tide at Southampton. But every office manager must contribute his bit toward thinning out the paper flood. Otherwise he will become separated from real life, ruling a paper kingdom.

One thing badly needed is an examination of routines. They build up mechanism that will smother us if we do not keep watch. If paperwork is inhibiting your creative function, shout loud and long, or devise some improved way of recording and controlling your job. If you are an addict or victim of "For your information" memos, get them stopped.

It is not admitting a mistake to say that a form or practice you devised five years ago is not paying for its keep. Procedures are seldom useless right from the start. They get that way when conditions change. Then the mistake is to continue them.

You might try attaching a question memo to routine reports every six months, asking about value and use. Then strike from the list those who do not respond within a reasonable time. And don't forget that in addition to getting supernumeraries off your list you should get your name off lists of things you don't want to see.

If you remain devoted to paperwork you lose your initiative. You find yourself dealing with things brought to your notice, having ceased to notice anything yourself. You have, as Parkinson says, been essentially defeated by your job.

There is something to be said for those who, finding themselves in that danger, have taken time out to laugh at the absurd situation. One man suggested that termites and bookworms might be cultivated and turned loose in files and cartons of papers more than five years old. These insect pests thrive on cellulose, wood-pulp and paper. There may come a time when business men, politicians and bureaucrats, not having thought of a better way to rid themselves of the paper burden, will keep stables of termites to eat their words.